

# **Committee on Resources,**

## **Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans**

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

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### **Witness Statement**

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#### **PREPARED TESTIMONY OF JOHN KIRTLAND, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ANIMAL STEWARDSHIP**

#### **FELD ENTERTAINMENT, INC., RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY® AND THE RINGLING BROS. CENTER FOR ELEPHANT CONSERVATION BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS HEARING ON H.R. 700, THE ASIAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT MARCH 15, 2001**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is John Kirtland. I am the Executive Director for Animal Stewardship for Feld Entertainment, Inc., which is the producer of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's and the founder of the Ringling Bros. Center for Elephant Conservation, both of which I will collectively refer to as Ringling Bros. I am testifying in support of H.R. 700, the Asian Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act.

Ringling Bros. strongly endorses H.R. 700. The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund has only recently begun to have a tangible presence. Yet the need for and value of such a program can't be denied. Even though it is still relatively new and to date it has received only modest funding, the contribution it has made and will continue to make towards the long-term survival of this species is invaluable.

#### **Introduction**

Ringling Bros. embodies 131 years of experience working with Asian elephants and other exotic animals. Our veterinarians, trainers and other specialists are among the leading experts in animal care and behavior and nowhere is this more true than in the case of elephants. These magnificent animals are today and have always been an integral part of the circus experience. Not only have they entertained generations of families, but their presence in the live performances has done so much to teach us all about elephants, their place in the natural world and the need to ensure their survival. As a result, Ringling Bros. has a long-established commitment to the conservation of the Asian elephant and other endangered species.

In the mid-1990's this commitment saw its two most significant events, the establishment of the Ringling Bros. Center for Elephant Conservation and the passage of the Asian Elephant Conservation Act. I am proud to say Ringling Bros. was among the earliest and leading proponents of this legislation, along with several of the other groups testifying here today. Thanks to our collective work and the tireless efforts of a number of Members of Congress, including several from this very Subcommittee, the AECA was enacted

and a mechanism was put in place to address the desperate needs of this species.

### Ringling Bros. Center for Elephant Conservation (CEC)

While Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey is known worldwide as a leading live entertainment entity, the December 1995 opening of its Center for Elephant Conservation, known as the "CEC", grew out of one of its more serious missions: to assure the present and future well-being of the Asian elephant species.

The CEC is located in Polk County Florida and is the most comprehensive facility of its kind. It incorporates experience and expertise gained from 131 years of traveling and working closely with Asian elephants and other exotic animals on tour. Ringling Bros. personnel know how to interact with the animals and how to keep them healthy, comfortable and well nourished. This unique experience and understanding was used in determining facility features ranging from the size and configuration of paddock areas and buildings to the design of innovative gate systems, drinking troughs, shading areas and other amenities.

Ringling Bros'. century of hands-on experience caring for Asian elephants has provided valuable insights in many areas of elephant husbandry, such as diet, waste removal, grooming and transportation of the animals. A familiarity with - and respect for - the lifestyle of breeding elephants was a determining factor in the selection of the secluded Florida site, as well as the CEC's selective visitation policy.

The CEC provides a safe, healthy environment in which the elephants feel secure and comfortable enough to breed. The births of Romeo and Juliette in 1992 and 1993 marked the first successful Asian elephant conceptions and births in the Ringling Bros. breeding program, and they were only the beginning. We have celebrated two more births, bringing the total since the CEC's opening to 10. Currently we are expecting the birth of a new calf any day and have four more confirmed pregnancies. As a result, the herd at the CEC, together with the approximately 40 elephants currently traveling with the two touring units of The Greatest Show on Earth<sup>®</sup>, constitute the largest Asian elephant gene pool outside of Southeast Asia.

The CEC is also actively engaged in a breeding loan/exchange program with several zoos around the country. This will enable us to strengthen and diversify not only the CEC's gene pool, but also that of the United States as whole. Moreover, every successful breeding brings us a little closer to being able to improve the propagation of captive elephants and wild populations of elephants in their range states.

In order to ensure the greatest benefit to the species, Ringling Bros. is firmly committed to ensuring that the knowledge and experience gained at the CEC is shared with interested veterinarians, scientists and scholars from around the world. With its unparalleled database, the CEC has become a global focal point for the worldwide study of Asian elephant behavior and reproduction and the site for some of the most important research done on Asian elephants. Exhibit A to my testimony consists of a synopsis of the various research projects that are underway at the CEC. The knowledge and understanding gained from these and the other work of the CEC will go a long way in advancing this multi-nation conservation effort.

Ringling Bros. has also helped to finance the Mahout Training School in Lampang, Thailand. The Mahout Training School trains mahouts, Asian elephant handlers, in humane and skilled elephant treatment and care. The school is a residential program that teaches the humane Northern Thai techniques for riding, controlling and caring for elephants. Since its establishment, the school has successfully trained mahouts from numerous regions of the world, including Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, Indonesia, Africa and the West. The school also rehabilitates elephants that have become dangerous and uncontrollable as a result of mistreatment and abuse. Through the use of consistent and humane treatment at the school, the elephants

become safe and employable, thereby increasing their chances of survival. The school's comprehensive approach encompassing training of both the mahouts and the elephants has led to significant improvements to the well-being and continued survival of captive Asian elephants.

### Asian Elephant Conservation Fund

As this Subcommittee is no doubt aware, the Asian elephant has been and is increasingly in grave danger of extinction. In 1997, the surviving populations in the wild were found in south and southeast Asia and numbered between 35,000 and 45,000. In addition, there are approximately 16,000 domesticated elephants. The Asian elephant is currently listed as Endangered under the United States Endangered Species Act, the IUCN Red List of Mammals and on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, known as CITES. The Asian Elephant Conservation Act, known as AECA, was passed by Congress in 1997. The AECA reflects what is now a universally accepted concept: that, in order to preserve this or any endangered species, the effort must focus on the area's of the world that provide the species' natural habitat.

Asian elephants inhabit some of the most densely populated areas of the world. The ever-increasing pressures created by the exponential growth of human populations on natural habitats in the form of encroachment by human populations and forest clearance for large-scale agricultural crops has resulted in a dramatic loss of forest cover. This, in turn, has meant that elephants and people are in direct competition for the same resources everywhere.

The AECA emphasizes remedies that address human/elephant conflict resolution and assists initiatives in Asian elephant range states by providing financial resources for those programs that directly or indirectly promote the conservation of Asian elephants and their habitats. Working with relatively modest funds, a little over \$1 million to date, the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund has been able to contribute to an impressive number of research and conservation projects. Grants under the fund often focus on projects that directly support and promote wild elephant management practices. Such projects include: (a) monitoring population trends of known populations; (b) assessing movement and ranging patterns of known populations; (c) developing management plans for managed elephant ranges; (d) resettlement of elephants; (e) anti-poaching assistance; and, (h) range state community outreach and education. Funding is also available for research and other projects that address use of domesticated elephants as such use relates to the conservation of Asian elephants in the wild.

Many of these projects also involve funding from local and international non-government entities like World Wildlife Fund and Wildlife Preservation Trust International. Another such entity is the International Elephant Foundation (IEF). This private foundation is a collaborative effort of Ringling Bros., the Fort Worth, Columbus and Indianapolis Zoos and other groups to support and operate in situ elephant (African and Asia) conservation and protection projects. It also is involved in and supports propagation and other programs involving captive elephant populations around the world. The IEF has already received an AECA grant for a project for the "Support for the Improved Health and Health Care management of Captive Elephant Populations of Sumatran Asian Elephants."

There is, of course, much more that can and should be done. Full funding of the amount authorized for the fund, as well as the other species conservation funds, would significantly enhance the beneficial impacts of the AECA. However, there are also problems that go beyond the reach of the AECA. Changes in the implementation of CITES to facilitate international breeding programs could be of immeasurable value. And the range states still need to do more themselves to protect the elephants and their habitats. Nonetheless, the

AECA has made a valuable contribution towards the preservation of this species and should be continued.

### Conclusion

The need for the AECA remains unchanged from when it was established just a few years ago. The threats to Asian elephants and their habitat, both direct and indirect, remain perilous. The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund and the other components of the Multinational Species Conservation Fund continue to be necessary and vital tools for ensuring the survival of the targeted species around the world. Ringling Bros., along with the other groups here today, remain as committed as ever to doing what we can to help, but this is an international problem and the small amount from private sources cannot address the overwhelming and urgent need. The Asian Elephant Conservation Act provides the additional assistance those of us working to save the Asian elephant need to ensure its survival.

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